DAWN

OPINION

Confused messaging

WHEN it comes to sensitive foreign issues involving Pakistan, there is a need to project a coherent narrative clear of contradictions. With regard to the possible deployment of Pakistani troops as part of the International Stabilisation Force in occupied Gaza, mixed messages from official quarters have added to the confusion, and allowed inimical actors to manufacture unverified claims regarding this country's future role in the Strip. Take the case of comments reportedly made by Parliamentary Secretary for Information and Broadcasting Danyal Chaudhry. Talking to a local TV channel, Mr Chaudhry said Pakistan's role in Gaza would be to ensure "there is no extremism" or cross-border attacks. By this, we assume he means no more attacks from occupied Palestinian territory into Israel. Asked if the foreign troops' mission would include the disarmament of Hamas, he replied: "absolutely". The remarks have drawn criticism from Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, who questioned the statements his colleague made.

Indeed, Mr Chaudhry's troubling comments seem to suggest that Pakistan is considering the Gaza mission not to protect the Strip's Palestinian population and ensure rehabilitation and reconstruction, but to enforce the US-Israeli plan for the territory. We hope this is not the case. But it is a fact that hostile actors are using such unguarded comments to construct dubious narratives. For example, an Indian TV channel had reported that Pakistan had removed the restriction that the green passport was valid for all countries except Israel, along with specifying the number of troops this country had allegedly committed to the Gaza mission. The information ministry said these foreign reports were fabricated. However, unless there is a coherent, unified official narrative, conspiracy theories and half-truths will spread regarding Pakistan's role due to the state's confused messaging.

To prevent the spread of inaccuracies regarding Pakistan's role, only the Foreign Office should be mandated to speak on the Palestine issue and other matters of import in global affairs. This would eliminate chances of contradictory messages being issued by officials. Regarding the actual mission in Gaza, there needs to be a parliamentary debate to bring clarity to the matter. Pakistani officials have repeatedly said the national policy on Palestine remains unchanged, and that this country stands with the Palestinian people. The message should be amplified by parliament, with a clear mandate regarding what role, if any, Pakistan forces will play in Gaza. If the aim is to protect Palestinian civilians from Israeli brutality, bring in aid and help rebuild the devastated Strip, then Pakistan can consider participation. However, if there are some other considerations, such as enforcing American and Israeli plans to dismantle the Palestinian resistance, and relegating the question of an independent Palestinian state to the back-burner, Pakistan should stay away from such schemes.

Unseen work

WOMEN shoulder the overwhelming majority of unpaid domestic and care work, a new report by the ILO has revealed. According to the labour body, of the 117.4m Pakistanis engaged in such work, nearly 67m are women. They cook, clean, tend livestock, and look after children, the elderly, and the sick — often without rest, remuneration, or recognition. In contrast, less than half as many men engage in similar duties, and for far fewer hours. This disparity is not only tantamount to gender injustice, it is a major economic blind spot. The time women spend on unpaid labour — over 15 hours weekly compared to less than seven for men — deprives them of opportunities for education, skill-building, and paid employment. It feeds into what economists term 'time poverty', trapping women in cycles of dependency and keeping the national female labour force participation rate among the lowest in South Asia. The ILO's warning that such inequity reinforces the gender pay gap and excludes women from leadership roles is a call Pakistan can ill afford to ignore.

The potential to reform this sector exists. As a 'pathfinder' for the Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection, Pakistan has access to global expertise that could transform care work into decent work. Initiatives such as the ILO's Promoting Rights and Social Inclusion project — which has helped unionise domestic workers in Punjab — show that meaningful progress is possible when policy meets political will. The registration of domestic worker associations and the drafting of employer codes of conduct mark early but encouraging steps towards long-overdue recognition of this invisible workforce. Similar efforts must now extend to other provinces, where millions of informal workers still remain outside any legal or policy framework. To unlock the care economy's full potential, Pakistan must put commitment into action. Setting minimum training standards, guaranteeing fair wages, and extending maternity and social protection benefits would not only improve livelihoods but also boost productivity. The government's pledge to raise health spending to 3pc of GDP within the next decade is a step forward; however, real transformation requires sustained investment, better regulation, and public recognition of those who sustain homes, hospitals, and communities. Women's unpaid labour silently subsidises the nation's economy. Redistributing this burden — through policy, workplace reforms, and shared household responsibility — is not only justice, it is smart economics.

Safer travels

THE e-challan system to end the misuse of traffic laws in Karachi has set politics on fire. The ruling PPP's efforts to placate the PTI and Jamaat-i-Islami over the increase in traffic violation fines fell on deaf ears. Recently, the City Council became the venue of intense uproar over a resolution against penalties to the tune of Rs50,000; the resolution demands the notification be withdrawn and e-challans treated as warnings. The motion, however, does list some valid concerns: decrepit streets and thoroughfares and missing traffic signs among them. Earlier, a petition demanding the system be declared illegal and "unconstitutional" was filed in the Sindh High Court. Such hostility towards disciplinary action is misplaced. But apprehensions cannot be overlooked as citizens' trust is essential for governance.

On Karachi's wild roads, driving the wrong way — registered as a 'minor offence' — is among the primary causes of serious road accidents and traffic disturbances. It is, therefore, mandatory that traffic rules reflect actual conditions and effectively maintain order and safe streets. Enforcement lapses will lead to frenzied, often highly perilous circumstances for commuters. Equally important is the assurance that a reduced penalty structure is imposed with transparency and impartiality. Under no circumstances should revenue trump safety. In a metropolis pockmarked with ramshackle infrastructure — dug-up roads, broken traffic signals, faded signage, lack of vehicle ownership safeguards — people find themselves caught in unintentional disruptions and face undue penalties. There is a desperate need for smooth commuting with a more empowered and sensitised traffic police to ensure compliance. At present, their wrath is reserved for the vulnerable. Above all, the electronic system must be glitch-free and malware-proof; Karachiites fear having to pay for digital mistakes with no one to complain to. In cash-strapped times, the focus should shift from extreme penalties to empathy-driven implementation through more cameras and better vigilance.

BY MALEEHA LODHI

The nuclear imperative

If fear is a key motivation to go nuclear more countries may be encouraged by today's turbulent world.

IN an increasingly lawless world in which the global order is fragmenting, countries have to navigate an uncharted geopolitical terrain in a very unpredictable environment. Powerful states and regional powers are using coercive power to try to bend other states to their will. The threat or the use of force has become an option of first resort for them and the principal means of 'resolving' disputes. Attacks by stronger countries on the sovereignty of their adversaries or weaker states have become all too frequent. Some of these aggressive actions are disingenuously called pre-emptive wars. Israel's war on Gaza, its attacks on Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Qatar, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, US bombardment of Iran and India's military action against Pakistan all testify to the increasing use of force and violation of international law.

This new era of escalation and growing insecurity has renewed thinking among countries about nuclear weapons. Iran and Ukraine were attacked by nuclear powers. An NPT-member state, Iran was bombed by two nuclear-weapon states. This has encouraged more countries to see nuclear weapons as a guarantor of security. The lesson security-challenged countries may have drawn from recent events is that without nuclear weapons they are more vulnerable to external aggression and attacks on their sovereignty.

The annual 2025 SIPRI report highlights the potential for more countries to consider developing or hosting nuclear weapons. This at a time when the nuclear arsenals of nuclear-weapon states are being enlarged and upgraded and arms control efforts have come to a halt. President Donald Trump's recent announcement that the US will resume nuclear testing seems a response to Russia's claim to have tested a long-range, nuclear-powered cruise missile. But it is a dangerous move that will further erode a fraying nonproliferation regime. In the annual resolution on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly's First Committee last week, the US was the only country to vote 'no' — for the first time.

A newly published book by Serhii Plokhy is a timely assessment of the nuclear issue and why countries have sought the bomb. *The Nuclear Age: An Epic Race for Arms, Power and Survival* is a tour de force of the history of nuclear weapons development and the geopolitics behind it, focusing on what motivated countries to acquire them. It is a cautionary tale about the perils of weapons that can annihilate all humanity. Plokhy writes that since the American acquisition of the bomb, the nuclear arms race never really ceased except in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the US and Soviet Union agreed on disarmament measures and several countries were persuaded or forced to give up their nuclear programmes. That lull ended in 1998 with nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan. Israel acquired a nuclear weapons capability decades earlier, in the late 1960s/ early '70s with significant French and some British help. By 2006, North Korea also joined the nuclear club. Meanwhile, Iran continued its nuclear programme.

With nuclear-weapon states upgrading their arsenals and no arms limitation efforts to restrain them, Plokhy argues the world is in a more dangerous place than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis because an uncontrolled arms race raises the chances of nuclear war, by accident or otherwise. He says a new threat emerged with Russia's attack on Ukraine's nuclear installations and Russian leaders threatening to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state. Although he doesn't mention this, Israel and America's attack on Iran's nuclear sites takes that threat to another level.

Plokhy is concerned with drawing lessons from the first nuclear arms race that can help stop or control the next one. The crux of his book lies in assessing why some countries built the bomb while others gave up trying to acquire one. This is a question long discussed in the rich literature on the subject with motivating factors ascribed to prestige, security, power projection, domestic politics and leaders' ambitions. Plokhy's core argument is that whatever the combination of motives, the fear factor is decisive — "fear of nuclear attack by another state or of superior conventional forces possessed by an adversary". Thus states' "concerns about their security, represented by the emotion of fear, is paramount for understanding why they go nuclear". Fear, he says, can generate different reactions, some irrational, others grounded in actual security threats.

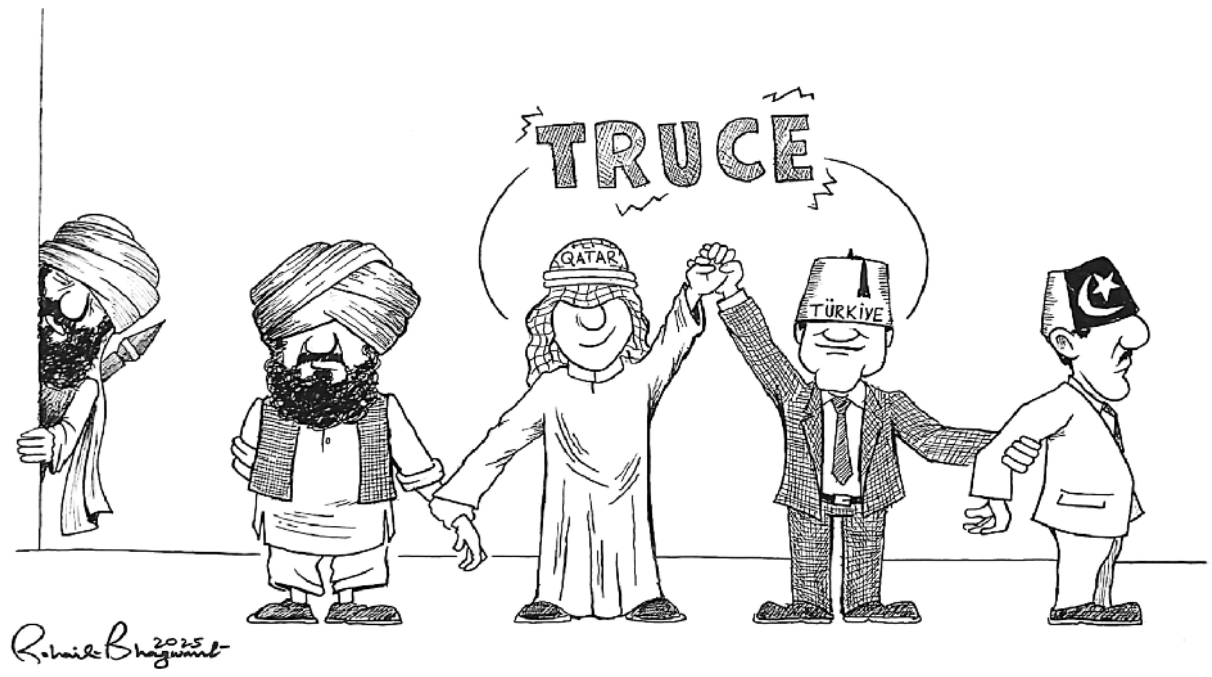
Fear has produced paradoxical effects in nuclear history, both fuelling the arms race and making it more manageable and predictable. Fear of the nuclear balance of terror among adversaries led to arms control and reduction agreements during the Cold War. What worries the author is that in today's unregulated global nuclear environment, fear can ignite a more dangerous phase of the arms race. He offers prudent advice. "We have to relearn how to manage our fear, recall how dangerous nuclear brinkmanship can be and recognise how important it is not to become a victim of nuclear blackmail and encourage the adventurism of nuclear rivals."

What about the factors behind South Asia's nuclear trajectory? Pakistan's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability was unambiguously security-driven. Two key developments shaped the decision. First, the Indian intervention in Pakistan's dismemberment and military defeat in 1971. The second turning point was India's 1974 nuclear explosion. The never-again thinking that followed 1971 — and fear of more Indian aggression — led to the strategic conclusion that Pakistan could only rely on itself for its security. Feroze Khan, author of the seminal book about Pakistan's nuclear quest, *Eating Grass,* explains that "Pakistan's humiliation [in 1971] laid the foundation for a shift in the once peaceful nature of the nuclear programme" to one aimed at acquiring the bomb.

India's motivation to go nuclear was driven less by security and more by its quest for great-power status and prestige, as George Perkovich and others have also pointed out. Khan says it was also about competition with China, which motivated both India's 1974 and 1998 tests. The 1962 Sino-Indian conflict acted as added incentive.

Given the current global turbulence and surge in regional rivalries, Plokhy's book ends with a stark warning. The world may see 40 additional nuclear-armed countries which would dramatically increase the threat of intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons. A sobering thought for a deeply troubled world. ■

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, UK and UN.



BY MUDDASSIR RIZVI

The RO ruse

THE Election Commission of Pakistan's recommendation to parliament that the election law be amended in favour of appointing judicial officers as District Returning Officers (DROs) and Returning Officers (ROs) is nothing short of an adverse comment on the performance of executive officers appointed to these positions to conduct General Election 2024 (GE-2024). This recommendation is part of the ECP's post-election review annexed with its statutory annual report laid before the National Assembly in September.

GE-2024 was challenged by opposition parties who alleged that ROs had manipulated the results. The ECP had appointed 144 DROs and 266 and 593 ROs for the national and provincial assembly constituencies, respectively, mostly drawn from the district management group. The ECP, however, believes that ROs from the judiciary have a better understanding of the laws and rules and hence can undertake poll activities more smoothly than executive ROs, who also command the district administrative machinery — necessary for the smooth conduct of any election.

Many candidates blamed ROs in their constituencies for manipulating results (Forms 47 and 48) while expressing confidence in the results (Form 45) prepared at polling stations. Some alleged that the ROs were under pressure from the establishment, while others claimed that a 'winning' Form 48 was sold to the highest bidder. However, no allegation of foul play could be proved in court, nor does the ECP appear to have initiated an inquiry.

It is against this backdrop that the ECP's recommendation becomes significant — almost a vindication of the allegations that executive officers did not perform their duties in accordance with legal and regulatory requirements. In fact, the report itself suggests that despite comprehensive training, "first-time ROs faced certain difficulties in performing the electoral activities", indicating that the law and rules might not have been enforced as intended. The nature of these "difficulties" needs further elaboration to ensure they did not "materially affect" the result of any constituency. The ECP may also wish to clarify the number of first-time ROs and correlate the alleged irregularities with the constituencies of their appointments.

But it was not just the na vet of "first-time ROs" that concerned the ECP; it was also their inaccessibility to perform poll duties. While the election law is explicit that any official appointed or deputed to perform election duties "shall be deemed to be under the control, superintendence, and discipline of the Commission…," these executive officials were not easily accessible to the ECP. "...DROs and ROs, being administrative officers, remained involved in performing their principal duties and were not easily accessible for electoral duties," reads the report.

Their inaccessibility is a serious offence and falls within the purview of another provision of the law, whose violation empowers the ECP to take strict punitive measures. If DROs and ROs were not easily accessible for poll duties, they breached Section 55 (3)(e), which bars any official on election duty from disobeying or avoiding compliance with any instruction issued by the ECP. Such inaccessibility goes beyond mere avoidance; it reflects disregard for the direct superintendence of a constitutional entity. Whether the ECP used its powers to penalise the "inaccessible" officials isn't known.

> The conduct of judicial officers in Pakistan has not always been above board.

Instead of invoking its punitive powers to improve enforcement, the ECP has now asked parliament to amend Elections Act, 2017, by adding a provision to sub-section 1(c) of Section 50 binding the chief justices of the high courts to provide judicial officers for appointment as DROs and ROs when requested by the ECP. The binding clause has likely been proposed because the chief justices had refused a similar request by the ECP for GE-2024.

However, Pakistan's electoral history shows that the conduct of judicial officers has not always been above board. The PTI, for instance, alleged foul play by ROs drawn from the lower judiciary during GE-2013. Although a subsequent judicial commission led by the then Supreme Court chief justice ruled out allegations of rigging, it acknowledged "shortcomings of the ECP" in conducting the elections, including a disconnect between the ECP and ROs, implying that the latter may have acted independently. The ECP itself noted this in an April 2013 press release after several political parties raised concerns about how ROs were conducting candidate scrutiny.

The recommendation also raises a constitutional question. Article 220 binds only the executive authorities in the federation and provinces to assist the ECP in the discharge of its functions. Meanwhile, Article 175(3) provides for the separation of the judiciary from the executive. Binding chief justices to comply with the ECP's requests may then need a constitutional amendment. Moreover, appointing judicial officers as DROs and ROs creates an institutional conflict of interest, as poll petitions are heard — under the existing law — by judges of the same high courts whose chief justices would be involved in appointing the lower court judges serving as DROs and ROs.

Interestingly, the ECP has again taken an evasive position in its report, reasoning why it should not take direct responsibility for conducting poll processes at the constituency level. It may not have enough officials to fill all RO positions, but it can certainly appoint DROs from among its own ranks. The ECP should assume direct supervision of electoral processes by appointing district election commissioners as DROs and seek legal reforms to strengthen this position. In their capacity as DROs, DECs can continue to "coordinate multifarious electoral activities and provide technical assistance" to ROs — the very justification the ECP has given for not appointing them to roles directly related to the conduct of polls.

There is ample evidence that the quality of elections managed directly by ECP officials as DROs and ROs is far better than those managed by 'borrowed' officers. Such oversight at the district level is crucial to keeping ROs — whether drawn from the executive or the judiciary — in line and ensuring that elections are conducted in accordance with the law and rules. The ECP can best serve its constitutional mandate only when it assumes micro-level supervision of the entire electoral process and uses its punitive powers to ensure full compliance by all officials. Judicial officers are not the panacea for democratic disorder, which remains rooted in the public's distrust of the electoral process. ■

The writer is based in Islamabad and works with the Free and Fair Election Network.

E-Mail: Editorial: editor@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Islamabad): re.isb@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Lahore): re.lhr@dawn.com | Karachi: city@dawn.com | Tel: (021)35670001 | Fax (Edit) (021)35682187 | UAN 111.444.777 (Management) (021)35683188, (Advt): (021) 35683801 | Marketing (Karachi): mktg@dawn.com (021)35613099 | Marketing (Islamabad): mktg.isb@dawn.com (051)2202701-5 | Marketing (Lahore): mktg.lhr@dawn.com (042)111-444-777